

OPPORTUNE AUTONOMY

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After overhearing a conversation I'd had¹ with co-juror Judith Hopf, the organizers of the Berlin Art Prize asked me to reflect upon what Judith and I had been so animatedly chatting about: how Berlin's art world had shifted, transformed, or evolved so dramatically alongside the city itself in the years we'd been observing it – nearly 11 for me, longer for her.

Questions flooded my mind. How does a city become – and stay – a universally recognized beacon for young visual artists and other cultural producers? When will Berlin's status as hip contemporary art hub of the decade, at least in the eyes of

the rest of the world, end? (and at some point, it will – geopolitics forced Paris to cede its art power to New York in the 1950s²; while art production has been steadily trickling out of New York since at least the late 1990s)³. It's been a decade since mayor Klaus Wowereit uttered the endlessly repeated statement that Berlin is “poor but sexy.” Now, still sorta-kinda poor (despite international investors using privatized real estate as personal banks) and arguably no longer so sexy, is the hype around Berlin and its art world still valid? And how do the underlying oppositional atmospheres that Berlin's art world seems to embody reconcile? There's a perceived unity – one big, multifaceted happy art scene for the globe's aspiring art professionals – but as anyone who lives here knows, the local scene also displays discord: factionalism at worst, fragmentation at best.

Was the art world in Berlin more reliably integrated in the past? It seems so, at least to me. Along with the questions came a personal memory that, for me, marked a turning point. In April of 2008, the fifth Berlin Biennale, curated by maverick duo Adam Szymczyk and Elena Filipovic, plugged itself into the city's institutions and empty spaces, introducing future art stars (Cyprien Gaillard, Tris Vonna-Michell, Ahmet Öğüt) and hosting performative events every night for weeks, which frequently brought together crowds. On opening weekend, the art-theory magazine *Texte zur Kunst* hosted a party at Cookies nightclub. It was the event to attend, and everyone was there; critics, emerging and established artists, gallerists, art-fair directors, advisors, collectors. We danced, laughed, drank, talked, and then danced some more. It was like a tribal ritual, a powwow, a joyous extended Berlin art world family reunion. Lovely artsy events have happened since, but, for me, it was never again as “together” as this.

Unity

That kind of euphoric moment can be illusory (and definitely a bit wine-fueled) but might represent the last echoes of what was, immediately after the Berlin Wall fell, the city's dominant art-world narrative – mostly young artists, curators, and gutsy gallerists using the blank slate of a once-divided metropolis to create a new kind of artistic life. It started as a greater community of musicians, club kids, and visual producers colonizing an abandoned inner city, working together mixing genres and scenes.

When I arrived in late 2003, the scene had already grown larger, but an overview was still possible. The galleries clustered in Mitte on Linienstrasse and Auguststrasse; then later near Checkpoint Charlie and under the Jannowitzbrücke. In February 2004, “Das MoMA in Berlin” bestowed provincial Berlin with a borrowed blockbuster exhibition. The Palast der Republik still stood in faded copper splendor, hosting exhibitions, public art, even dance parties. Art-worlders hung out at the brand-new Münzclub, a grand bel étage apartment and Berlin's first attempt at a members-only club. The international market and media fawned over the lean, clean New Leipzig School painters; Thomas Demand and Olafur Eliasson were big, but not yet house-

hold names. Artists were still working in cheap studios in Mitte; studios in Mitte were still cheap. Gallerists, on the other hand, could feel the hyper-cool Berlin 1990s mood wearing off and launched the first Gallery Weekend Berlin in 2004, in part to bring collectors into the city. With only 21 galleries taking part, most within walking distance, it felt like an intimate local walkabout.

To someone fresh from New York, the scene looked like artsy communism: a creative utopia of collaboration and acceptance infused with a pioneering spirit, even if the true pioneers had come years before. Speaking German was crucial⁴, but even if you didn't, if you had something to offer – a good idea, a large space, an article, just good energy – you'd be welcomed into the fold. It was a feeling exemplified by Robby, my downstairs neighbor, who sold expensive Italian chairs from a tiny design store across from Galerie EIGEN + ART by day, but on summer evenings pulled them into a circle outside to gather the neighborhood stalwarts, all East Berliners, and just talk (at some point I was invited to sit too). Nobody seemed to be making a *lot* of money, but nobody cared, since we were making *enough*.

Exhibitions that would have never worked in New York, like Klaus Biesenbach's "RAF" exhibition (January 2006) at Kunst-Werke, were mounted, despite obstacles solved in unique ways⁵. Artist-run galleries like Diskus and Amerika, both formed by recent East German art-school graduates, appeared on Brunnenstrasse. In April 2006, the fourth Berlin Biennale – titled "Of Mice and Men" and curated by Maurizio Cattelan, Massimiliano Gioni, and Ali Subotnick – refocused the art scene to Auguststrasse, the original post-Wall art strip (and site of Biesenbach's seminal "37 Rooms" exhibition in 1992, another exhibition integrated into the urban fabric). Although much of the art had melancholic under- and overtones (Nathalie Djurberg's stop-motion videos, Francesca Woodman's photography), the show was akin to a small Beuysian social sculpture drawing crowds with interactive projects, exhibitions in private apartments, and marathon performances⁶. It was all in one place. It was even *funded*⁷.

Funded, but artistically autonomous⁸. In Berlin's greater art world, too, municipal and political powers didn't seem to care much about how the art world ran, and left it alone (for better or worse), but art doesn't function in a vacuum, and environment affects content. During and

after the Biennial that year, several quiet urban shifts took place, heralding changes that would trickle into the world of art production in the following years: Berlin finally got its main train station. In June 2006, Germany hosted the World Cup soccer tournament and Berliners flew the German flag, without irony and without shame, for the first time since World War II. The pace of private renovations to the gray apartments dotting East Berlin picked up, more comfort-driven foreigners moved in (no more coal heating), the new gallery hubs included galleries from New York and London. By 2007 *Der Spiegel* rated Berlin as a top "creative class city" based on Richard Florida's indices of Talent, Technology and Tolerance⁹.

Inner discord

It's difficult to say exactly when the art world fragmented, but the global financial crash in late 2008 was an obvious shake to a scene that had already grown too large to be truly together¹⁰ but was still flush enough, new enough, to avoid being competitive or antagonistic. But as if in a slow time-lapse loop, one young gallery after another closed (at the same time, a few large multinational galleries, like Sprüth Magers and Capitain Petzel, opened spaces here). Scads

of non-German art professionals left town. After the dust cleared, Berlin's art world appeared to be strewn about the city: geographically separated into clusters, socially striated, each gallery, neighborhood, nationality, or even art-school with its own clique, many subgroups barely overlapping or even meeting. The communal vibe of the early 2000s (and certainly the 1990s) was truly gone. Berlin's art world was no longer naïve¹¹.

To again take an event as a marker, the change seemed most visible and final to me at the opening of the city-funded, politically-loaded "based in Berlin" exhibition in 2011¹², not long after some of my favorite dealers of emerging art, like Birgit Ostermeier or Aaron Moulton (Feinkost), closed their galleries. At the opening, I found almost no one I knew. I finally discovered a fellow veteran feeling the same way; we sat outside Atelierhaus Monbijoupark's¹³ open exterior wall (artist Mandla Reuter had removed and relocated the wall, making the space seem more like a stage; above us was a scaffolding platform upon which readymade Chinese SUVs¹⁴ by Oliver Laric were parked), and just listened. Twentysomethings spoke loudly about their upcoming shows in American English, not German, not even bothering to conceal their very un-Berlin careerism; everyone carried

beer through the exhibition spaces, in which artworks were installed on walls with peeling paint – something we'd all done many times at countless Berlin group shows in cavernous untouched industrial spaces. But for me, this time, the beer and peeling paint felt affected. Berlin bohemia, packaged and for sale, as an export product; a simulacrum bordering on postmodernist hyperreality. "Poor but sexy", that flippant, fun statement, had actually been a call to come exploit not only the city but also the "creative" self.

Community versus competition. Solidarity versus self-preservation. It seemed as if, suddenly, there was too much money flowing through the city for its art crowd to stay communal and bohemian, but not enough for its members to feel secure in their endeavors. I'm reminded of a passage in Martha Rosler's *Culture Class* (2013), "For a long time now, art and commerce have not simply taken place side by side, but have actively set the terms for one another creating and securing worlds and space in turn." Berlin had long felt exempt from this interplay, but had perhaps finally succumbed to the neoliberal tide that had been rising in the western world for decades.

Where are we now?

Berlin is still hyped as an art hub, plenty of artists are here producing in large spaces, new ones arrive every day, a few non-German art stars (like Douglas Gordon) have even relocated, 50 galleries took part in Gallery Weekend 2014. But still I sense a yearning for unity lost: Gordon has established a little community of his own on Kurfürstenstrasse; among the new arrivals, I sense a nostalgia for something they never knew, which is much how I felt arriving in New York at 26, less than a decade after Andy Warhol died¹⁵. The “anxiety, paranoia, and rivalry” that writer Jörg Heiser mentioned in a Frieze article¹⁶ taking down “based in Berlin” is something I increasingly feel in my everyday life:¹⁷ even my civilian (i.e. non-artsy) friends work more, worry more, feel sussed for income potential at parties. Apartment prices in Mitte have quadrupled. Robby moved away from my street without saying goodbye; his design store ceded to an ice cream joint, and those left of the old Ossi chair-circle crew now meet in a nearby smokers’ bar that Munich entrepreneurs bought last year. After years of grassroots initiatives and cultural-policy discussions trying to get a Berlin-based Kunsthalle off the ground (and then two years of a privately funded

“Temporary” Kunsthalle on the then-empty Schlossplatz), Deutsche Bank bypassed all discussion by simply up and naming its exhibition space a Kunsthalle. Berlin’s play-it-safe, sell-it-off experiments in city planning have led to a nondescript streetscape and art-driven gentrification strategies that have been referred to as “zombie architecture” or “zombification of the city.”¹⁸

Are we in danger of a “zombie art world”? If we’re not careful, absolutely. But, as the eternal American optimist, I see a teensy bit of hope in our current fragmentation and heterogeneity. There are tenuous connections between the parallel art worlds throughout the city, especially in terms of discourse. And, like the old groups that ran Berlin’s “social-sculpture style” art-, concept-, and music-driven nightclubs in the early 1990s, new independent groups of artists and thinkers are emerging to assure that at least part of art production here remains nonhierarchical, liberated, and not driven solely by the global art-market juggernaut: ZK/U, Mind Pirates, FF, Haben und Brauchen, the Coalition for Independent Arts¹⁹. At a time in which “luxury living” is overtaking most of the urban center’s last fallow bits, it’s reassuring to see that artists and architects are communally constructing buildings as group owners

(Judith Hopf, in fact, is one member of an important artist Baugruppe); an effort to create sustainable artistic communities that cannot be nudged out by speculators. Even official channels are seeing the necessity of cooperation: Berlin Art Week, a fall event now supported by the city, was born in 2012 and although its origins come from the art market, the event brings together museums, galleries, and the artists they show.

At the end of the day – even if they’re informed by their peers, art-school trends, and history require at least satisfactory live/work conditions – most artists produce their ideas and objects alone. But without a working infrastructure and dialogue, those things can get stuck languishing in the studio, or never make it further than an endless series of DIY shows in temporary spaces.

The groups above are working toward a scenario that is an idealized but not entirely unrealistic combination of the belief systems that marked twentieth-century Berlin; the communist one that failed, and the late-capitalist one whose structural and social flaws require fundamental and massive rethinking and revamping. Neither niggling conflicts nor blind consensus do art much good; both naïve euphoric unity and factionalization can quickly lead into dead-ends. Can we have both solidarity and

self-preservation? Berlin won’t stay the trendy global art-production hub it now is, but its art-world players are still in a unique position to claim the power to decide how they’ll keep generating ideas that have meaning in the future. Let’s not let that chance pass.

1 — On one of our many breaks from viewing many, many works visible on PDFs projected onto a blank white wall in an upper-floor apartment on Mehringdamm, during which we drank coffee, ate a lot of Haribo, and smoked like stacks as the day wore long and nerves wore raw.

2 — Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (translated by Arthur Goldhammer), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

3 — Ares Kalendides, “Is affordable housing in Berlin still possible?” in: Places, A Critical Geographical Blog, online at: <http://blog.inpolis.com/2013/09/30/is-affordable-housing-in-berlin-still-possible/>, accessed May 4, 2014.

4 — It still is, and I’m not sure non-German-speaking newcomers understand just how much they miss. “Unlike London or New York, Berlin is innately provincial: it has no historical pedigree as a capital city, and no native economy. Newcomers have been only superficially integrated as the mall-style padding to a persistently local infrastructure.” Mark Price, *ArtReview*, April 2014, p 86.

5 — The state balked at funding such a politically loaded show; Kunst-Werke thus raised 195,000 Euros by auctioning donated artworks on eBay. See: <http://www.artnet.de/magazine/ebayauktion-finanziert-berliner-rafausstellung/> accessed on May 3, 2014.

6 — *Kiss* by Tino Sehgal – who still lives in a legalized squat on Auguststrasse – saw performers making out for months in Clärchen’s Ballhaus’s Spiegelsaal.

7 — The fourth Berlin Biennale was the first Berlin Biennale funded through the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

8 — Because of Germany’s history, the content of federally funded cultural events cannot be guided by politics or censored in any way.

9 — Martha Rosler, “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part II”, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-ii/>, accessed on May 3, 2014.

10 — Evolutionary anthropologist Robin Dunbar claims that one can cognitively only have 150 friends (and: groups of more than 150 people or other social units will separate into subgroups). The “Dunbar Number” is thus 150. By early 2008, there were approximately 600 galleries and project spaces in Berlin.

11 — In spring of 2007, at an exhibition at Galerie Alexandra Saheb, I ran into Wolfgang Staehle, a New York-based net artist and founder of The Thing, an early Internet artist forum launched in 1991. We briefly spoke. He was visiting from New York, where we’d met a few years before. He looked at the beer-drinking scene at the gallery spilling out onto Linienstrasse, and said, wistfully: “Berlin is so beautifully naïve.”

12 — “based in Berlin”’s political background and “open call” for artist submissions unleashed a wave of protest in Berlin, due to the fact that the city allocated 1.4 million euros to mount a “Leistungsschau” of young Berlin visual arts talent (the permanent contemporary art museums in the city had a budget of around 4 million

euros at the time).

“Leistungsschau” means “showcase of talent” and is a term normally used for dog shows and the like. See Jörg Heiser, “Words and Deeds”, in: Frieze.com, January 1, 2012, online at: http://www.frieze.com/issue/print_article/words-deeds/, Accessed May 4, 2014.

13 — The studio building in Monbijoupark, a 60-year-old venue that hosted this event and was meant to be demolished in 2011, was finally destroyed in the summer of 2013.

14 — See http://www.basedin-berlin.com/en/artists/#ap_aid52.

15 — Although, my second night in New York, I found myself at a rooftop party sharing a cigarette with Billy Name. At the time I didn’t know who he was.

16 — Heiser, op. cit.

17 — I am no longer sure which is the “real” world.

18 — Niklas Maak, “Living Like Sophie-Charlotte”, *Texte zur Kunst*, Issue 92, pp. 30ff.

19 — And, of course, the founders of the Berlin Art Prize.